

LIVING

Watching for at-risk species

Volunteer citizen scientists have lots to contribute

This week, I would like to pass on to readers some recent news items from Bird Studies Canada (BSC).

BSC is a not-for-profit organization built on the contributions of thousands of volunteer citizen scientists. It is Canada's only national charitable organization dedicated to advancing the understanding, appreciation, and conservation of wild birds and their habitats.

Data from BSC's volunteer surveys and targeted research projects are used to identify significant changes in bird populations and help direct conservation planning. You can contact Bird Studies Canada by going to www.birdscanada.org.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

PROJECT FEEDERWATCH NEEDS YOUR HELP

For a selected period every week from November to April, thousands of FeederWatchers count the kinds and numbers of birds at their feeders, and then submit their observations to us. This information helps scientists study winter bird populations.

Project FeederWatch participants receive a full-colour bird poster and calendar, a FeederWatch Handbook and instruction book, access to the data entry portion of the FeederWatch website, and the chance to contribute to a continent-wide bird research project.

Project FeederWatch is a joint program of Bird Studies Canada and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. In Canada, you must be a member of BSC to participate.

Participation in Project FeederWatch is free for BSC members.

Support bird research, monitoring, and conservation by becoming a member of Bird Studies Canada. Benefits include a subscription to our bi-weekly Latest News e-newsletter, four issues a year of BirdWatch Canada magazine, free participation in any of our volunteer programs, and a charitable tax receipt for the full amount of your membership.

The 2009-2010 Project FeederWatch season will run from Nov. 14 to April 9. Learn more about Bird Studies Canada and Project FeederWatch at www.birdscanada.org, or call us at 1-888-448-2473 to sign up.

CHANGES TO ONTARIO'S SPECIES AT RISK LIST

The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources is adding 10 bird species, removing one, and reclassifying eight on the list of Species at Risk in Ontario.

The chimney swift and whip-poor-will are being added to the list of Threatened species. Four additional species are being added as Special Concern: common nighthawk, olive-sided flycatcher, Canada warbler, and horned grebe. Two other birds are being reclassified to lower categories of risk, reflecting population increases in recent years.

Southern Ontario's bald eagle population is being downgraded from Endangered to Special Concern. The hooded warbler is being reclassified from its previous status of Threatened to Special Concern

WHOOPING CRANECAM



The chimney swift is a recent addition to Ontario's Species at Risk List. The province added 10 bird species this year, removed one and reclassified eight. The chimney swift is classified as a threatened species



The whip-poor-will was one recent addition to Ontario's Species at Risk List as a threatened species.

The world's first Whooping CraneCam was launched this summer. On July 29, Operation Migration's CraneCam sponsored by Duke Energy began streaming live video and audio, offering watchers never-before-seen views of one of the world's most endangered birds, the majestic whooping crane.

Visit www.operationmigration.org/crane-cam.html to watch as pilots and crane handlers condition juvenile whooping cranes for the biggest adventure of their lives - their first migration.

The cranes and planes are making their way south from Wisconsin to Florida, a journey of more than 1,200 miles that can take from 60 to 90 days to complete. The world's population of whooping cranes was on the verge of extinction in the early 1940s but has gradually made a comeback, thanks in part to a unique project designed to reintroduce a second migratory population into eastern North America.

Each year since 2001, Operation Migration's pilots have led a cohort of captive-hatched and reared whooping cranes imprinted to follow an ultralight aircraft along a migration route between the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin to the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in Florida. This flock has now grown to 108 birds.

However, according to Tom Stehn, whooping crane co-ordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the year 2009 was a struggle for North America's main whooping crane flock that winters in Aransas, Texas and nests in Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories.

A record 270 whooping cranes had arrived at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in the fall of 2008, but they faced harsh conditions from the ongoing drought in Texas. Their favourite foods of blue crab and wolfberry were in short supply due to the salty conditions in the marsh. A record 23 whooping cranes, or 8.5% of the flock, didn't make it through the winter, with some of the cranes found to be emaciated.

In the past 20 years, the 2008-09 winter ranks as the worst in terms of mortality. In addition, only 22 chicks fledged from 62 nests in Wood Buffalo this summer, a below average production year. With the drought continuing in south Texas into the fall of 2009, wildlife officials are leery of what conditions for the flock will be like at Aransas in the 2009-2010 winter.

Threats faced by the whooping crane flock are growing, according to Stehn. In addition to ongoing sea level rise that would make the marshes too deep for the cranes to use, housing develop-

ments are springing up next to marshes where wintering cranes have foraged in the past. In the migration corridor, the cranes are facing a proliferation of wind farms and associated power lines. Collisions with power lines are the number one cause of mortality for fledged whooping cranes, and the miles of lines continue to grow substantially.

In North America, the total number of whooping cranes in both the wild (384) and in captivity (152) has reached 536. Clearly, the path to recovery for whooping cranes remains rocky. It will take increasing vigilance by man if this species is to survive and provide a thrill for our great, great grand children to see.

U.S. Report on Economic Impact of Birding

A new report released by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shows one of every five Americans watches birds, and in doing so, birdwatchers contributed \$36 billion to the U.S. economy in 2006, the most recent year for which economic data are available.

The report, entitled Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis, shows that total participation in birdwatching is strong at 48 million, and remaining at a steady 20 % of the U.S. population since 1996.

MORE PIPING PLOVERS NEST IN ONTARIO

After a 30-year absence of breeding piping plovers, a pair successfully nested in Ontario in 2007, and four pairs of this endangered species nested in the province in 2008. We are pleased to announce that the plovers nested again in Ontario in 2009. Nests have been established at both Wasaga Beach and Sauble Beach. All nests are protected from predators with exclosures and are monitored by volunteers.

Volunteer guardians spend time on the beach monitoring and protecting the plovers, and educating the public about these rare birds and the efforts underway to protect them.

More Critically Endangered Birds Announced

BirdLife International's latest evaluation of the world's birds has revealed that more species than ever are threatened with extinction. The annual Red List update, on behalf of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Union_for_the_Conservation_of_Nature_and_Natural_Resources> (IUCN), now lists 192 species of bird as Critically Endangered, the highest threat category, a total of two more than in the 2008 update.

New additions to this category include the gorgeted puffleg (a recently-discovered hummingbird from Colombia); the Sidamo lark from Ethiopia (uplisted to this category due to changes in land use); and the medium tree-finch, one of the Galapagos finches (partly as a result of an introduced parasitic fly).

A staggering 1,227 species (12%) are

classified as Globally Threatened. In eastern North America, the once-common chimney swift has suffered continent-wide declines of nearly 30% in the last decade alone, and has been uplisted to Near Threatened.

The good news is that when conservation action is put in place, species can be saved. The Lear's macaw (Brazil), Chatham petrel (New Zealand), and Mauritius fody (Mauritius) have all been downlisted from the Critically Endangered category as a result of dedicated conservation efforts. Visit www.birdlife.org/news/news/2009/05/red_list.html to learn more.

U.S. State of the Birds Report Released 19 March 2009

A new report on bird populations in the United States indicates that of the 800 bird species that inhabit various habitats in the U.S., nearly a third are endangered, threatened, or in significant decline due to habitat loss, invasive species, and other threats. The U.S. State of the Birds shows widespread declines over the last 40 years, but also documents some cases where conservation action has resulted in dramatic increases for species targeted for protection.

The report synthesizes data from three long-running bird censuses conducted by thousands of citizen scientists and professional biologists: the Christmas Bird Count a joint program of the National Audubon Society and Bird Studies Canada; the North American Breeding Bird Survey, administered by the U.S. Geological Survey and the Canadian Wildlife Service; and the Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Canadian Wildlife Service).

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service coordinated creation of the new report as part of the U.S. North American Bird Conservation Initiative. Visit www.state-ofthebirds.org/ to learn more and to watch a superb video on bird conservation.

EBIRD WANTS YOUR OBSERVATIONS

eBird Canada <http://www.ebird.ca/>, a real-time, online checklist program, collects observations from birdwatchers right across the country.

Together, eBird Canada participants have already contributed more data than almost any other bird monitoring program in Canada (an impressive 1.7 million observations). These observations can be used to help monitor bird populations over time and across the landscape.

Participating in eBird is simple and free, and you can even use it to keep track of your own sightings and checklists. eBird's goal is to maximize the utility and accessibility of the vast numbers of bird observations made each year by recreational and professional bird watchers.

It is amassing one of the largest and fastest growing biodiversity data resources in existence. For example, in 2006, participants reported more than 4.3 million bird observations across North America. For more information, go to: <http://ebird.org/plone/canada>.

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